CHAPTER 1

A TOUCH OF HOME

Ask any one who ever served overseas in the U. S. military and he or she will tell you about the need for anything that can boost morale in a stressful and sometimes dangerous job. World War II, Korea, Vietnam or Iraq, the need is no different, no matter where or when. Just as an hour of listening to a Bob Hope comedy relieved the strain of Army life in 1941, an NCO club full of GIs watching an NFL football game on TV does today. Just as the doughboy was cautioned to take medicines in the jungles of World War II, today's soldier learns about AIDS through the media of Armed Forces Radio and Television.

It began with a proverbial handful of G.I.'s erecting a "Rube Goldberg" contraption to broadcast "pop music" to their buddies in the barracks. In 50 short years it has become a worldwide satellite radio and television system providing G.I.'s around the globe with the sounds and sights of home.

Along the way, the "by soldiers, for soldiers" has conceived a saga as full of folklore as any in our country's history. It's a story of humble beginnings, of struggle, of political intrigue. It's a story of characters, human and animated, full of American wit and personality. It's a story of movie stars, of big Hollywood creations and silly little skits. Most of all, it's a story of warm and selfless compassion, full of tragedy and joy, defeat and victory. It's the story of the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS).

In war or peace, the mission of the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service has remained the same: to provide a touch of home through military news and entertainment to the United States military wherever it has ventured. From Iceland to Antarctica, from South Korea to Germany from Japan to Panama, AFRTS is there.

Today, AFRTS provides the most popular of America's radio and television news, sports and entertainment programming to Department of Defense (DoD) personnel and their families in over 130 countries and U. S. territories worldwide. Its audiences see programs much the same as they are broadcast in the U. S., without censorship, propagandizing or manipulation.

Program owners and syndicators in the private sector make their very valuable products available to the AFRTS at a fraction of the cost that commercial stations would normally pay. Many provide their programs free of charge. The service exercises no control over the content of this material, but it does delete commercials and replaces them with DoD internal and public service announcements (PSA's).

The heart of the AFRTS operation today is the Broadcast Center located in Sun Valley, California. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the AFRTS Broadcast Center (AFRTS-BC) distributes radio programs consisting of news, special events coverage, commentary, music and of course, play-by-play sports. Major networks like ABC, NBC, CBS, Mutual, National Public Radio, AP, and UPI provide newscasts directly. Besides the excellent entertainment programs provided by syndicators, AFRTS-BC distributes some musical programs that they produce "in-house." These include programs that present the most popular new recordings in all musical categories. From the Broadcast Center radio and television programming goes out worldwide by a network of satellites, both domestic and international, for time-sensitive programs and tape or disk shipments.

As the reader will discover, it was the very inventive nature of the U. S. serviceman himself that gave birth to the service we know as AFRTS. As a consequence, the dedicated men and women of AFRTS have never failed in their mission. They resolved to deliver their "information and entertainment" to troops in the combat theater using uncanny creativity that was often required to get it there.

For most of those who have served in the AFRTS, their contribution to military men and women worldwide has enriched their own lives as well. Just as many of them brought to AFRTS a wide range of talents, their service experience contributed to their future careers as well, whether in military or commercial broadcasting or related fields.

Until the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia, few AFRTS personnel had served in frontline combat areas. Only occasionally had armed forces broadcasters found themselves exposed to the threats of German bombing or rocket attacks on London or a counterattack by diehard Japanese defenders on a South Pacific island, although they were always intensely aware of the action and the threats. Those working at the Hollywood location of AFRTS may have lacked a combat environment, however, its staff made up for this with its hard work and commitment to the war effort. They worked day and night to produce the programs for the men in the field.

At one time or another, several of those who worked at Armed Forces Radio in Hollywood during World War II talked about writing a film script or a novel in the manner of M*A*S*H. No doubt about it, the clash between the creative chaos of professional broadcasters-turned-soldiers and the military-turned-broadcasters would make for some very funny material. Like in the popular

TV show, real-life, warm and zany anecdotes abound.

A writer for Bob Hope before the war, Sherwood Schwartz, endured the draft, went through eight weeks of basic training, and prepared to transfer to the Aleutian Islands. The day before his unit was to ship out, he received orders to report to the Armed Forces Radio (AFR) headquarters in Hollywood. There he spent the remainder of his military career, writing scripts for such AFRS programs as "Command Performance" and "Mail Call." On occasion, he'd tailor programs for specific entertainers whom soldiers had requested to appear, including Hope. Virtually every Hollywood personality performed on Armed Forces Radio during the war. Certainly, none lacked in their commitment to the war effort.

Clark Gable was a particular case in point. Responding to a request, Schwartz created for Gable and Bob Hope a great "Mail Call" script. In it, they were to exchange little black books containing the names of eligible women. The plot would build up to a double date. Gable would fix up Hope with Dame May Witty, then 80 years old. In turn, Hope would match him with little Margaret O'Brien, age 8. Just imagine these two classic stars with such a funny bit!

Despite the script and his stellar co-performers, Gable had to be talked into doing the show. He held a lofty place in Hollywood stardom, yet, Schwartz recalls, this movie giant "had an absolutely petrifying fear of a live mike." He could perform on a stage, but "was terrified of a microphone." His phobia asserted itself almost immediately after he came out to center stage. There before him was the live soldier audience collected in a Hollywood radio studio. His hand began to tremble. So badly, according to Schwartz, that "all you heard was the script rattling. He couldn't talk. His tongue got stuck in his mouth. He was just terrified. Although Gable was then the number one Hollywood star, you had to feel sorry for the man standing there frozen."

On his part, Bob Hope later expressed wonderment: "Can you imagine a fellow who was that famous and everything, being that nervous about being out in front of the public?" Hope recalled how Gable's "hand was shaking so much that I had to reach across and hold his arm and steady him in front of the audience. There was nothing else you could do because the radio audience didn't know what was happening. He was just not used to personal appearances."

To get his co-star to perform, Hope whispered to Gable, "Clark, we're old friends, these guys love you. I love you. There's nothing to be nervous about. Why don't you go back and come out again?"

So, they started over. Hope held the script so that it wouldn't rattle and gradually Gable relaxed, got into his role and did the show. Schwartz recalled, "It was a remarkable achievement on Bob's part. Within a minute and a half, he was able to calm Gable down."

Even today, Schwartz remembers it as "a very funny show."(1) If possible, another "Mail Call" made an even more profound impression on the writer. He was asked to produce a program featuring great American composers performing their own works. So, he wrote a script that would include Jimmy McHugh, Johnny Mercer, Sammy Cahn, and the great Jerome Kern. What a cast! But, Kern refused to do the show.

So, Schwartz called him. Kern explained that he thought none of the young kids at the war's front would know him because he considered himself of an older generation. No one there would remember his song, "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes." In response, Schwartz told him, "My God, how could we do a show about the greatest American songwriters without including you?"

After the call, Schwartz went to see him in person, only to find that the songwriter had strengthened his resolve, saying "I tell you, I don't like to appear in public." Schwartz hadn't realized that Kern was a very shy person, "extremely shy." Each time Schwartz would manage to talk him into doing the show, Kern would change his mind again a few days later. Schwartz went back to see him again. This time, Kern displayed a big fever blister that he claimed developed from his nervousness about appearing on the program. As written, the "Mail Call" script had Kern appearing last on the program. Waiting backstage, with the big fever blister on his lip, he was "nervous as can be." Finally, the announcer introduced him to the live military audience. As he came out to center stage and walked up to the microphone, all the way out he received nonstop applause. According to Schwartz, "There was a standing ovation from these men who Kern thought had forgotten him or didn't know who he was. He stood at the microphone and started to cry, tears just streaming down his face. He never even said 'Thank you.' He didn't say anything. He just walked over to the piano...the humblest of men, the most modest of people, a genius, afraid nobody knew him...He just walked over and played "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes.'" Kern's appearance was "a beautiful story of a beautiful man who didn't recognize his own fame."(2)

Most entertainers, of course, had no such problems in appearing in front of audiences. W.C. Fields' deep desire to perform for the troops produced the saddest image that Bob Hope remembers of Armed Forces Radio. Hope was doing a "Command Performance" for which "Fields showed up in a wheel chair. He was ill, but he still wanted to do that "Command Performance." That was the last time I saw him. It just shows his determination and the respect he had for the people in the services."(3)

Whatever effort it took for them to appear, entertainers selflessly gave of themselves so that the American fighting man would be able to listen to his favorite performers and programs. Of course, performing for Armed Forces Radio certainly didn't hurt the careers of aspiring entertainers. To Bob Hope, this was obvious: "There is no doubt about it. I think that the exposure, doing something good like that, was very beneficial to the performers."

Nonetheless, Hope sees this as a secondary reason entertainers have continued to appear for the troops: "Oh, I think it's their hearts that did it. It's a combination of wanting to do it and knowing how important it is to the people that are over there. That's the reason they do it. They open up. It's a beautiful thing." On his part, Hope does acknowledge an ulterior motive: "There's a selfish kind of thing, too. The men pleased me so much. When I went down to March Field in 1941 to do my first military show, that audience was so great. I happened, at that time, to be coming along big in radio and pictures, and I was very popular. That audience was so great, I said, 'Wait a minute. How long has this been going on? I've gotta have more of this."(4)

Hope has been getting "more of this" for more than fifty years. To this day, he still performs live and on radio and television for American troops in all corners of the world. To him, such appearances were "always a delight. You get the feeling that you're doing something special for the troops."(5)

Likewise, AFRTS broadcasters have seen their jobs as "doing something for the troops," year after year, whether operating in peacetime Korea, in war-torn Vietnam, or in the busyness of the Los Angeles Broadcast Center. In the normal course of their work, the dedicated people of AFRTS have often performed far beyond the normal call of duty.

It's important to keep in mind two critical elements of AFRTS' early success: First, a good number of patriotic professionals, who just happened to be very famous stars in the entertainment field, donated a virtual infinity of free labors to America's soldiers and sailors. Their enthusiasm was contagious. A very impressive number of the early contributors worked for "a dollar a year," because they believed in what they were doing.

Second, no reflection on the merits of these pioneer artists would be complete without honoring those young soldier broadcasters of the early years. Their crude and wacky ingenuity was the real inspiration for what has envolved into the largest satellite broadcasting organization the world has ever seen. What marries the earliest broadcasts to the current version, is that all these services are still produced by service people, for service people. That foundation reflects not only the legendary team effort of the U. S. Armed Forces, and the "show must go on" ideal of the performers. It also reflects the very embodiment of the American Spirit itself.

Thus it is the individual efforts of thousands, with a heredity of *esprit de corps*, that bequeathed a half-century legacy of the military's primary morale-building agency, the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service. It's an exciting story.

Discover more, of the "folklore and history," in the pages following.

NOTES - CHAPTER 1

(1) Interview with Sherwood Schwartz, July 14, 1983; Interview with Bob Hope, August 2, 1986.
(2) Schwartz Interview.
(3) Hope interview.
(4) Ibid.
(5) Ibid.